Reviews

The GI Generation: A Memoir. Frank F. Mathias. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2000, xiii + 257 pp., photos, postscript. $25.00.

The Greatest Generation Speaks. Tom Brokaw. New York: Random House, 1999, xxii + 237 pp., photos. $19.95.

Reviewed by Stephen Rippon, United States Air Force Academy

The titles are telling: Mathias' stands out for its lack of pretension, perhaps a gentle rebuke to Brokaw. Unfortunately, the University Press of Kentucky's publicists needlessly invoke Brokaw's first work by titling their press release for *The GI Generation*, "The Making of 'The Greatest Generation.'" Mathias, a professor emeritus of history at the University of Dayton, will have none of that. With characteristic candor, he notes, "I have written this book as the historian I am, and not as an 'old-timer' intent on gilding the lily" (xii).

Putting the titles aside temporarily, I must admit that Brokaw opens *The Greatest Generation Speaks* promisingly with a section called "War Stories," where he compares the well-known World War II literature with the array of memoirs by common Americans who fought in the war:

> Those memoirs, many of them self-published or simply bound manuscripts, add to the rich body of literature from World War II. The best of that literature—the works of James Jones, Norman Mailer, Kurt Vonnegut, William Manchester, Joseph Heller, and Paul Fussell, for example—is well known. The homespun books will likely never be read outside the authors' immediate families. Still, the memoirs of infantrymen, fliers, sailors, and chaplains get at the essential truths of war in their own memorable and deeply personal fashion. (3)

To underscore his commitment to bringing out these people's stories, Brokaw adds a few pages in the front of the book for war veterans to inscribe their own memories. It is merely a gesture, though, and one

that helps me realize just why I found this book so unsatisfying. How can one summarize "What I remember most about the war years" in just eight lines, or reminisce about "When the war was over" in just eleven? If Brokaw is trying to adhere to a formalist aesthetic theory of how creativity within fixed limits can actually enhance pleasure and beauty, he is sending an awfully mixed message here.

Would that Brokaw heeded some limits! Instead, he bowls us over with story after story received in the wake of his bestselling 1998 book, *The Greatest Generation*. I could not bear to read more than three or four of these episodes at a time; perhaps this book is best suited for hospital waiting areas and coffee tables. Interestingly enough, Brokaw himself admits the problems of his method:

> When I shared some of these stories with a friend, he was moved and then, after a moment, he commented on the nature of the world in which we live: 'You hear something like that and you're resolved to keep it in your mind forever, but twenty minutes later you're wondering what's for lunch.' It was a thoughtful and perceptive comment on the pace of modern life and the selfish agendas that preoccupy too many of us. (167)

If Brokaw really sympathizes with his friend's observation, then why does the method of his book mirror the frenetic "pace of modern life" he laments?

And why does Brokaw stubbornly insist on calling them "The Greatest Generation" when the subjects of his new book are rather ambivalent? Some of those featured in his book attempt to correct the assumption that their generation lives up to his moniker. A former Deputy Secretary of State, John Whitehead, writes Brokaw: "I've read your book with great interest. I'm not sure that those of us who served our country in World War II deserve to call ourselves the 'greatest' generation. Like any group of Americans, we were a mixed bag" (14). And if Brokaw does not heed feedback from Whitehead, he certainly does not probe the implications of these words from Nancy Keister of South Yarmouth, Massachusetts: "I was not brave like the people in your book and felt very scared and disheartened at being separated from my husband and baby [when she caught scarlet fever and had to be quarantined]" (95). Keister speaks for many honest people who would not identify themselves among the "greatest." Such comments, however, do not faze Brokaw from using the superlative.

The GI Generation is superior to *The Greatest Generation Speaks* in part because it does not claim greatness; instead, Mathias describes life in Carlisle, Kentucky, in the years between the World Wars. When Mathias needs an outside source to verify his memory, he looks to old friends and to the *Carlisle Mercury*, the newspaper for that town of 1500 located between Lexington and Maysville.

Mathias lets us know from the start that his memoir's focus is not the war itself; he described his own war experiences in a 1982 memoir entitled *G.I. Jive: An Army Bandsman in World War II* (University Press of Kentucky, reprinted in 2000). Instead, Mathias' focus here is on life in the prewar years:

> Like Einstein's realization that a falling man feels no force of gravity, we whose youth fell within these disordered decades lived reasonably happy lives, with little or no sense of the ever-mounting gravity of each prewar year. Who was I to know that ten of my playmates or pals would be killed in action just a few years down the road? (x)

The war, retrospectively, casts a shadow over Mathias' entire narrative. Mathias reflects that on the day he left for the war, "I was concerned enough to wish that some sort of 'red mark' would appear above those destined to die. If such marks had hovered over the heads of those boarding the bus, one would have shown itself above my classmate Marion Letcher and another over my older friend Nick Feeback" (266). Mathias supplies those red marks for us throughout the memoir, and also lists in the postscript the names of his friends who were war casualties. For example, in a chapter called "Major and Minor," Mathias explains how his older friend Andy Metcalfe

> introduced me to swing, showing me the way as usual. . . . Many of the boys and even some of their parents labeled him as a 'sissy,' but his many girlfriends knew better, as did I and my pals. It made us mad to hear it. But Andrew was to prove himself as one of the finest of the GI Generation.
>
> A decade later, on April 22, 1945, S/Sgt Andrew B. Metcalfe, 349th Infantry, 88th Division, single-handedly attacked two Nazi machine-gun nests with rifle and grenades in the Italian mountains. The German gunners had pinned down his platoon. Metcalfe knocked both guns out but not before the second one shot his life away. (76)

In contrast to the stories falling under Brokaw's hackneyed headings ("War Stories," "Bonds," "Loss," "Faith," "Reunions," "Love Stories," "Appreciation," "Children," "Lessons"), the stories in *The GI Generation*, like that of Andy Metcalfe, emerge naturally from the narrative.

While the references to future war deaths invoke the war overtly, through much of Mathias' memoir the war is a persistent shadow. On a visit to Cincinnati, young Frank visits a friend whose mother requests, "Go up to the corner and get me a loaf of bread from Ben Greenstein the Jew." Mathias qualifies this episode significantly with the phrase, "in perhaps typical pre-Holocaust innocence" (221). Another example of how the war touches the narrative comes when Mathias explains how he got heavily involved in swing music (thanks to his red-marked friend Andy Metcalfe) and played saxophone in local bands. His mother's investment in a top-of-the-line sax may have saved his life because it encouraged him to practice so much that, "just seven years after opening my new sax," he left G Company, 145th Infantry, 37th Division, to serve in an Army band (80). Two-thirds of his former unit was later killed or wounded in Luzon.

Even in the swing music young Frank loved, the shadow of war emerges. At the end of a chapter called "Hammering Catfish" (referring to Frank's childhood practice of stunning and catching fish by hammering on the ice above them), Mathias quotes from a swing tune called "Shantytown": "I'll be just as sassy as Haile Selassie / If I were king, wouldn't mean a thing, / Keep my boots on call, / Read th' writin' on th' wall" referring, as Mathias recounts, to the antifascist hero and Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, who resisted when Mussolini invaded in 1935 (59 – 60).

Contrast this episode with a passage from a section of Brokaw's book, "Loss":

> The snappy patter of Bob Hope and the soothing baritone of Bing Crosby, the boogie-woogie of the Andrews Sisters, the jazz of Duke Ellington, Glenn Miller's distinctive melodies—all are on the sound track of the memories running across the mind's eye.
>
> However, the stark reality is that 292,131 Americans were killed in action in World War II. (77)

In place of mere adjectives like "snappy" and "soothing" and "stark," followed by a statistic, Mathias gives us song lyrics and characters who are connected to a real place—Carlisle, Kentucky. Mathias populates a

small piece of the world with characters such as his father, Lucky, whose autodidacticism, twisted kidney, and ambivalence towards travel I will remember long after the flurry of stories from Brokaw's book subsides. After reading in Mathias' memoir about the first few war deaths, I tensed in anticipation whenever a new contemporary of Frank's entered the narrative, sensing the anxiety that Frank felt on that day he boarded the bus and wondered who would die. I think the reason for my emotional involvement with the fates of Mathias' friends is that he recreates such a complete and convincing world—the result of working within a limited scope.

A final passage expresses the difference between Brokaw's and Mathias' books. Mathias remembers his red-marked friend Andy Metcalfe, who made candy to give away as Christmas gifts:

> He specialized in walnut loaded fudge, caramel rolls, divinity, and various types of cream candy. And he had special concoctions of his own which he named after the people receiving his gift. His gifts, at most, were wrapped either in red, green, or white tissue paper, for the more costly paper designs of later decades had not arrived. We never missed what we did not have. (64)

The principle Mathias admires in his friend's gift-giving during the Depression is the same principle that makes his memoir more effective than Brokaw's in capturing that generation. Mathias keeps his story simple and local—a Kentucky childhood seen through the lens of the war that ended it. Brokaw, on the other hand, has compiled a book of sound bytes that, in trying to capture an entire generation's voice, leaves the reader with little to remember. Reading through even a section of Brokaw's book is like gorging on penny candy, while reading Mathias's memoir is like savoring an appropriate portion of Andy Metcalfe's divinity.